

## Consultation on 'A Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021-2031'

### Executive Summary of Cancer Research UK's Response – October 2021

The publication of this new draft cancer strategy for consultation is a highly welcome, major milestone for cancer services in Northern Ireland. This new strategy will be critical in driving a reduction in preventable cancers, diagnosing cancers earlier, supporting people to live well with and beyond cancer, and ensuring more patients survive. We support the ambitious overarching vision for the cancer strategy – equitable and timely service access for all, and the delivery of world class cancer services in Northern Ireland. This ambition will be an important catalyst for change, bringing the cancer services and health system around a shared vision.

The strategy rightly captures the key areas that must be transformed in order to improve cancer outcomes in Northern Ireland, and recognises that they must be underpinned by critical enabling factors – particularly a fully resourced workforce and access to high-quality data. We recommend the strategy's overall aims are extended to include a commitment to reducing late stage diagnosis as this will be key to measuring success, and would welcome an opportunity to support with developing an appropriate ambition here as well as offering any further support to the Department of Health in working to achieve our shared ambition to transform cancer outcomes in Northern Ireland.

There are two important areas that must be addressed in the final strategy:

- **Greater detail is needed on the timings and sequencing for delivering the strategy's recommendations**, and interdependencies must be identified to ensure that recommendations are effectively prioritised and sequenced. In particular, it is essential that the cancer workforce plan, a key focus of the strategy, is fully costed and progresses at pace to enable success. We appreciate that there will be an implementation plan which we hope will address these concerns. CRUK would welcome the opportunity to work with the Northern Ireland Department of Health in developing the forthcoming implementation plan.
- **The NI Executive must allocate the required funding to deliver on the ambitions of this strategy in full**, without which it will be impossible to deliver the lasting transformation necessary to meaningfully improve cancer outcomes. Cancer patients consulted by CRUK were clear that this is a critical issue, with the aims of the strategy a 'wish list' until backed up with funding. With the UK Government's 2021 Comprehensive Spending Review offering clarity for Northern Ireland's budget across the crucial initial years of this strategy, the Northern Ireland (NI) Executive must prioritise funding to deliver this strategy.

### Priority recommendations

1. **Fully fund the cancer strategy:** The NI Executive must allocate the required funding to deliver the strategy in full. This is vital in order to deliver on the strategy's ambitions and see lasting transformation that meaningfully improves patient outcomes.
2. **Address the cancer workforce crisis:** The Cancer Workforce Plan is an essential enabler of the strategy. At the forthcoming Budget, the NI Executive must take the opportunity to provide the required funding to ensure that the cancer workforce keeps pace with patient need and can deliver on the cancer strategy's ambitions.
3. **Improve data collection, quality, and access:** Evidence-based decision making must be underpinned by quality, accessible data. Ensuring sufficient resource, infrastructure and policies

are in place for the collection of and efficient access to high-quality data should be a priority for implementing the strategy.

## Summary of CRUK's full recommendations

### Prevention

- Recommendations on smoking, obesity and skin cancer should be amended to include a requirement to publish and deliver the strategies within a set timeline. The smoking strategy should include the target for NI to reach a smokefree future (adult smoking prevalence of 5% or less across all socioeconomic groups) by 2035.
- Campaigns raising awareness of cancer risk factors and targeting behaviour change must be developed with input from the target audience and funded to run across all mediums, with a targeted focus on specific groups in order to reduce health inequalities.

### Early Diagnosis

- The strategy should commit to measures to encourage timely help-seeking and improving access to primary care, supporting the strategy's aim of improving early diagnosis rates.
- For FIT bowel screening, the strategy should set out timelines for sensitivity and age-range changes, informed by a review of FIT screening modelling efforts in the other UK nations.
- The core aim of delivering patient-centred care, with the right test delivered at the right time in the right setting, should inform the development of diagnostic hubs.

### Treatment

- Quality data must be at the heart of driving change in approaches to cancer treatment. Implementing the required data governance, legislation, infrastructure and funding will be key to overcoming existing data challenges.
- It is concerning that there are no firm recommendations for radiotherapy included and we urge that this is amended in the final strategy document – particularly for the rolling replacement of LINACs and a continual cycle of data review and examination.
- Stronger commitments are needed to enable delivery of the vision set out for clinical trials. Consistent communication with patients and clear targets for improvement will be critical.

### Implementing the Strategy

- The strategy commits to reporting after three years and at subsequent three-yearly intervals, which must build in opportunities to review progress and adapt the strategy as required, ensuring it remains relevant and impactful to 2031.
- More detail is required on the specific initiatives which will deliver ambitions for data. Multi-year funding for Northern Ireland Cancer Registry should also be secured so that it can plan more strategically and build its capacity accordingly.
- We recommend that the strategy incorporates key recommendations from CRUK's *Bench to Bedside* and *Creating Time for Research* reports in order to build research capacity and accelerate improvements in patient care.

## About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world's largest cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. We support research into over 200 types of cancer, and our vision is to bring forward the day when all cancers are cured. In 2020/21, Cancer Research UK invested £421 million in new and ongoing research projects into the causes and treatments for cancer.

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